

The Oregonian

Clark County News

Boaters sail to confront corps over river island

01/07/03

BILL STEWART

Martin Island, a triangular collection of sand and cottonwood trees 23 miles downstream from the Interstate Bridge between Vancouver and Portland, has become ground zero in a battle related to proposed deepening of the Columbia River channel

Boaters from throughout the metropolitan area tonight will challenge part of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' environmental study of the channel deepening, which says no recreational facilities between Portland and Astoria will be harmed by the placement of sand and rocks dredged from the river.

An armada of boaters and yacht club representatives plans to rebut that statement, citing the lagoon on 278-acre Martin Island in Cowlitz County as a leading destination for floating camping trips.

The corps' plan is to fill that lagoon with more than 1 million cubic yards of dredge spoils -- sand and small rocks -- as the first step in creating what it describes as an "intertidal marsh habitat." That's a swampy wildlife area that gets wet with every high tide.

Channel deepening was requested by port districts on the Columbia and Snake rivers, and by import-export businesses as the world's shipping companies started converting fleets to vessels that need more than 40 feet of water to move. If all questions are answered and problems solved, the work could start later this year.

Tonight's hearing is sponsored by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, the Oregon Land Conservation and Development Commission, and the Washington Department of Ecology.

The lagoon was created in 1966 when the sand was taken to build Interstate 5, which is a few yards to the east, across Martin Slough. A channel, constructed so rafts of logs could be stored away from wind and waves, now provides boaters access between the lagoon and the river.

The corps wants to put additional dredge material on the private island's west side as "beach nourishment," then cover the island with two feet of topsoil so it could support grazing cattle.

Aerial photos from 1974 show the square-cornered lagoon filled with rafts of logs. But the log rafts have been replaced by rafting boats, a practice of tying craft together for social purposes or because dock space is inadequate or nonexistent. The lagoon offers safe haven from the river current, its waves and the ocean-going traffic that passes close to the island's west side.

Yacht club spokesmen talk of outings filling the lagoon with 50, 75 and even 100 or more boats. Both ends of the slough are slowly filling in, so boats needing more than 4 feet of water are warned to creep in from the north. Inside the lagoon, water depth reports vary from 15 feet to 20 feet.

Byron Hanke, newly seated Clark Public Utilities commissioner, former executive director of the Port of Vancouver and a boater, used the lagoon twice last summer. He's also one of the officials testifying in favor of deepening the river channel from 40 to 43 feet.

But not when it comes to Martin Island.

"In a nutshell, I believe all dredge spoils should be used for beach enhancement. There is no reason to fill Martin Lagoon," said Hanke, who has served as commodore of the Vancouver and Portland yacht clubs, and president of the Columbia River Yachting Association. "Boaters see areas where protective beaches have been washed away, and then the bank and trees fall into the river."

Another boater, Bob Waldron of the Small Yacht Sailing Club of Oregon, fears that once Martin Island gets on the list of places to dump dredge sand, the lagoon could be filled whether the channel is deepened or not.

He said other Columbia River boating destinations such as Sand, Goble and Coon islands are heavily used now and might not accommodate boaters displaced from Martin Island. Waldron said 47 skippers anchored in the Martin lagoon for his club's 2002 Memorial Day cruise.

The corps, in its regular maintenance dredging, now pumps sand to three beach enhancement areas and 14 upland disposal sites. If the channel is deepened the corps would use 29 land sites for disposal, the same three beach enhancement areas, and one ocean site.

The island is owned by Clark County developers Richard and Bob Colf, who have not returned calls. Bill Stewart: 360-896-5722; 503-294-5900; billstewart@news.oregonian.com